

Neoliberal crises and the city: Wrestling with authoritarian neoliberal urbanism(s)

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Abstract

This Special Issue presents ‘authoritarian neoliberal urbanism’ as an empirical marker and a concept that signposts the ascendance of a new constellation in which authoritarianism becomes an ever-growing force in our cities in the neoliberal present, not only structuring how urban space is experienced but also repurposing it to reinforce authoritarian legitimacy and consolidate political power. This paper introduces six contributions that empirically or conceptually uncover some of the complexities of this new constellation which have remained untracked, unnarrated and misdiagnosed. We draw on the collective insights from these contributions to posit that authoritarian neoliberal urbanism is neither monolithic nor uniformly oppressive. It adapts to local contexts and conjunctural shifts, is (re)configured through both formal and informal, flexible and rigid, (il)legitimate and illegible governance tools and through complex engagements between the state, market actors and urban populations alike, often in tandem with the state’s continuous effort to (re)secure political legitimacy. Such paradoxes, we suggest, urge taking seriously the variegated, contested, and evolving nature of authoritarian neoliberal urbanism(s) as well as their context-specific and situated contradictions and ambiguities. It is within these contradictions and ambiguities that alternatives to neoliberal continuity may be found and the intensifying slide towards illiberal form(s) of capitalism can be transcended.

Keywords

authoritarian neoliberalism authoritarian state, authoritarian urbanism, illiberal urbanism, neoilliberalism

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摘要

本期特刊将“威权新自由主义城市化”既作为一种经验性标志，也作为一个概念提出，标志着一种新格局的兴起。在当下的新自由主义语境中，威权主义在城市中逐渐成为一股日益增强的力量，它不仅构建了城市空间的体验方式，更对城市空间进行功能重构，以强化威权合法性并巩固政治权力。本文介绍了六项学术成果，这些成果或从经验层面、或从理论层面，揭示了该新格局所蕴含的部分复杂性，这些复杂性此前一直处于未被关注、未被阐述且被误判的状态。我们借鉴这些学术成果的集体见解，提出如下观点：威权新自由主义城市化既非单一同质的形态，也非全然具有均一的压迫性。它会适应地方语境与情境变迁，通过正式和非正式、灵活和僵化、（非）合法和难以识别的治理工具形成（或重构）自身形态；同时，它还通过国家、市场主体与城市民众三者间的复杂互动而运作，而这一过程往往还伴随着国家为（重新）巩固政治合法性所付出的持续努力。我们认为，这些矛盾促使我们既要重视威权新自由主义城市化所具有的多样、充满争议且不断演变的本质，也要重视它们在特定情境与具体场域中所存在的矛盾与模糊性。正是在这些矛盾和模糊性中，我们才有可能找到新自由主义延续性的替代方案，并能超越超越那种不断加剧的、趋向非自由形式资本主义的发展态势。

关键词

威权新自由主义、威权国家、威权城市化、非自由主义城市化、新非自由主义

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Introduction

Over the past decade, the global proliferation of authoritarian state practices has transitioned from a marginal academic concern – once framed primarily as a reaction to neoliberal crisis (Bruff, 2013) – to a central topic in mainstream public and political discourse. Activists, scholars, and civil society actors have long sounded the alarm that critical domains of social reproduction, namely housing, energy, ecology, and care (Fraser, 2022), are being hollowed out by the persistent dominance of neoliberal hegemony. Movements that sought to highlight these crises and resist austerity were met with authoritarian state practices designed to uphold ‘zombie neoliberalism’ (Peck, 2010). However, as the authoritarian turn now threatens the foundations of liberal democracy itself, even those who once endorsed neoliberalisation, austerity, and political

crackdowns find themselves vulnerable to far-right political leaders who channel popular discontent in ways more palatable to capital than the counter-hegemonic struggles they once opposed.

This shift has been captured under the rubric of ‘authoritarian neoliberalism’ (Bruff, 2013; Bruff and Tansel, 2019), underscoring contemporary neoliberal hegemony’s paradox: increasingly fragile, yet ever more assertive. It is both a consequence and a symptom of an era of crisis and transition, namely an interregnum marked by instability (Davies, 2024; Stahl, 2019). Authoritarian neoliberalism is characterised by attempts to re-boot economic growth at all costs with the dominance of key capital sectors – finance, big tech, real estate, and fossil fuels – aggressively defended, even as protectionist policies and national reindustrialisation

efforts challenge traditional neoliberal principles. At the heart of this transformation is a deepening critique of the (neo)liberal-democratic state, seen both as the cause of the crisis and a primary barrier to prosperity, a phenomenon Hendrikse (2018) terms neo-illiberalism.

This Special Issue (SI) draws attention to the downstream repercussions of this new reality, and coins ‘authoritarian neoliberal urbanism’ as a useful concept to capture the novel ways in which authoritarianism has become an ever-growing force in our cities in the neoliberal present, not only filtering our experience of urban space but also adapting it to fit authoritarian leaders’ understanding of what works for their purposes. A vast body of scholarship on neoliberalisation and urban politics (He and Wu, 2009; Keil, 2009; Rose, 2024; Theodore, 2020; Theodore et al., 2011) has long established the city as a key terrain for enacting neoliberal policy reforms. Critical urban scholars, however, have cautioned against the persistent over-reliance on the neoliberal explanatory frame (Parnell and Robinson, 2012), noting that it risks reinforcing ‘the illusion of neoliberalism as the blueprint for understanding urban development’ (Olt et al., 2024: 2).

Meanwhile, a growing body of scholarship has documented some constellation of norm disrupting developments that have been happening on the ground: while neoliberalism has remained a powerful and pervasive force, it has increasingly entangled with other logics – state violence, capitalist restructuring, and illiberal political imaginaries (Can and Fanton Ribeiro da Silva, 2024; Di Giovanni, 2017; Jenss, 2019; Tansel, 2019). This SI follows the lines of this scholarship to wrestle with ‘authoritarian neoliberal urbanism’ as a concept and as a marker of transformations that, while evidently underway, have often gone unexamined, unarticulated and misdiagnosed. It advances two core aims. First, it engages

with existing scholarship to take stock of what has been evidently at work across cases and contexts, briefly mapping the emergence of ‘authoritarian neoliberal urbanism’ as a new constellation. Second, drawing on the insights from the contributions of the SI issue, it opens up some of the complexities of this constellation.

In doing so, the aim is not only to articulate some of the shared features of authoritarian neoliberal urbanism as a conceptual framework for future research. Perhaps more importantly, by fleshing out some of its on the ground ambiguities and contradictions, the Special Issue advances our understanding of authoritarian neoliberal urbanism in six critical ways:

First, it complicates the view – often repeated in liberal news media and more positivist scholarship – that authoritarian practices are a strictly top-down and immutable imposition. Instead, the papers illustrate that authoritarian states often exhibit strategic flexibility, adapting their governance practices in response to shifting conjunctural dynamics. This adaptability underscores the importance of understanding authoritarian neoliberal urbanism as a dynamic and context-sensitive phenomenon.

Second, it sheds light on the overlooked bottom-up dynamics in the unfolding of authoritarian neoliberal urbanism: local actors, community organisations and grassroots movements are shown to interact with, influence, and sometimes challenge authoritarian urban practices, revealing the contested and negotiated nature of urban space even within repressive regimes.

Third, multiple case studies presented in this SI underscore the coexistence of formal regulatory mechanisms and informal governance practices. This hybrid governance arrangement is shown to be a defining feature of authoritarian neoliberal urbanism, facilitating both state control and the ability to navigate complex urban realities. Such

arrangements allow the state to enforce control selectively, often in ways that reinforce its dominance while maintaining a facade of legality or procedural order.

Fourth, the papers in this collection call into view how authoritarian states play an active role in managing and arbitrating among entrepreneurial interests through the 'state-capital nexus'. The state does not simply enable market forces but strategically intervenes to suppress, co-opt, or privilege certain market actors to secure political and economic gains. This selective engagement reinforces state power while maintaining the appearance of a liberalised urban economy.

Fifth, several contributions bring to the fore the need for a renewed focus on how we think about resistance and contestation and the potential for transformative urban politics. Experience from different countries suggests that beyond actively resisting or passively complying with the exclusions, dispossessions, and violence of authoritarian neoliberal urbanism, diverse social actors variously negotiate, contest, and sometimes even internalise the dynamics of authoritarian neoliberal urbanism, shaping its manifestations in unexpected ways.

Finally, the SI highlights the mobility of authoritarian neoliberal logics and practices across space and time. By examining cases from various geographical contexts, it reveals how authoritarian practices travel, adapt, and mutate in response to both global and local conditions. This insight offers a nuanced and pluralistic understanding of authoritarian urbanism, signposting the necessity to explore its diverse and evolving forms: authoritarian neoliberal urbanisms.

Drawing on these insights we argue that authoritarian neoliberal urbanism is neither monolithic nor uniformly oppressive. It adapts to local contexts and conjunctural shifts, is (re)configured through both formal and informal, flexible and rigid, (il)legitimate and illegible governance tools; and

through complex engagements between the state, market actors and urban populations alike often in tandem with the state's continuous effort to secure the power to deliver (electoral) legitimacy. Such paradoxes urge moving beyond binary classifications and reductive framings in exploring authoritarian neoliberal urbanism and to take seriously the variegated, contested, and evolving nature of contemporary authoritarian neoliberal urbanisms(s). It is within these contradictions and ambiguities that alternatives to neoliberal continuity may be found and the intensifying slide towards illiberal form of capitalism can be transcended.

From neoliberalism to authoritarian neoliberalism

The neoliberal turn from the 1970s can be understood from our vantage point today as a counter-revolution by and for capital (Cooper, 2024). Scholars writing at the birth of the neoliberal order were very quick to identify the anti-democratic, authoritarian implications of the neoliberal counter-revolution – which extended beyond support for 'free' markets and private sector 'efficiency'. Two authors, notably hailing from outside of the imperial core, conceptualised the authoritarian dimensions of the neoliberal turn in ways that Bruff (2013) has shown have renewed relevance today. Poulantzas (2014: 203–4) recognised that the neoliberal turn was bound up with an 'authoritarian statism' understood as: intensive state control over every sphere of socio-economic life, combined with radical decline of the institutions of political democracy and with draconian and multiform curtailment of so-called 'formal' liberties, whose reality is being discovered now that they are going overboard.

Poulantzas highlighted 'the growing autonomy of the executive, the increased importance of presidential or prime ministerial powers [and] the consolidation of

authoritarian, plebiscitary parties that largely represent the state to the popular masses' (Jessop, 2011: 52). As is now well established, the earliest instantiations of neoliberal policy were often delivered through direct, authoritarian interventions (backed by the US) – with the violent 'shock therapy' (Klein, 2007) of the Pinochet regime in Chile one of the clearest examples – which led to a radical experiment in urban planning deregulation in favour of real estate interests (Navarrete-Hernandez and Toro, 2019).

Austerity and state repression, though, have only prolonged and deepened the crises that stem from neoliberal policy and the power and wealth created for the 'winners' at this period at the expense of the majority (Williams and Gilbert, 2022). Indeed, a series of major crises have unfolded in rapid succession over the past decade – climate change, housing, inflation, care, energy, food – with governments finding themselves unable to make meaningful interventions into these intersecting crises after decades of stripping back public capacity through privatisation and out-sourcing (Apostolopoulou and Liodaki, 2025; Davies and Blanco, 2017; Edelman, 2021; Sharma, 2021; Theodore, 2020). Crucially, in addition to playing out across the urban–rural, core–periphery terrain (Özatağan and Eraydin, 2024a), the material and perceived injustices resulting from these intersecting crises have triggered powerful reflexes from majority groups to demand targeted state support, or the removal of state support or rights for the 'enemies' of the people (Chacko, 2018; Davies, 2021; Edelman, 2021; Kaptan, 2020; Sinha, 2021) who are explicitly addressed by a new wave of political leaders of this 'authoritarian neoliberalism' (Bruff, 2013). For Bruff and Tansel (2019), authoritarian neoliberalism refers to a governance model where neoliberal economic policies – such as deregulation, privatisation, and market-driven reforms – are

enforced through authoritarian measures, including state coercion, repression, and the restriction of democratic freedoms.

The concept of 'authoritarian neoliberalism' has rapidly gained traction within critical social science research, as the result of and a response to the 'faltering, but also dogged and mutating, hegemony of neoliberal rule' (Peck and Theodore, 2019: 261). Not only have several major economic crises been calling forth extraordinary fiscal interventions or (when that option is not available) rapid social breakdown, but there are slower burning social reproductive crises of housing and ecology to which paradigmatically neoliberal policies continue to offer little respite. The turn towards more authoritarian practices to limit public dissent and close down alternative pathways that might challenge capital or entrenched political power (from neoliberalism's 'winners') is simultaneously a sign of the insecurity and struggle for new ways to secure hegemony in these groups' interests.

While representing the longer lineage of authoritarian practices within neoliberalisation, a feature that characterises the current (con)juncture is '*sabotaging accountability*' (Glasius, 2018): the deliberate disruption of the political lines of accountability between citizens and those in power. The sabotage can vary in extremity – from rigging elections through to developing client journalists – but the blurring or removal of systems of accountability for the powerful is centred around winning and securing political power for those favoured 'winners' of neoliberalism – the real estate developers, state-sponsored corporations, fossil fuel multinationals, platform capitalists, and agri-business. These 'winners', working hand in glove with ethnonationalist political leaders, are challenging the legal-rational authority of the liberal-democratic state in the name of restoring economic growth and acting in defence of favoured majoritarian groups or class

fractions by sweeping away bureaucratic and deliberative institutions. The further expansion of the power of favoured sectors of capital, however, only serves to deepen the crises the public face.

Authoritarian neoliberal urbanism

Neoliberalisation has meant a remarkable transformation of cities and the built environment: the rise of the real estate financial complex (Aalbers, 2020), austerity urbanism (Davies and Blanco, 2017; Peck, 2012; Theodore, 2020), regional urbanisation (Scott, 2008), planetary urbanisation (Brenner and Schmid, 2011), the creation of the ‘rentier city’ (Rose, 2024), and infrastructural developmentalism (Schindler and Kanai, 2021) – to cite a few. These transformations have not as yet been fully integrated into theorisations of authoritarian neoliberalism. Hence a critical theoretical lacuna remained about how these urban dynamics and the political realities produced by neoliberalism’s manifold crises are united. This special issue contributes to filling this theoretical gap.

Critical scholarship working along these lines has called into view excessive centralisation of state power (Ergenc and Yuksekkaya, 2024; Fearn and Davoudi, 2022), top-down interventions that displace citizens for land acquisition (Yesilbag, 2022) and state-backed mega-projects (Kinossian and Morgan, 2023; Tarazona Vento, 2017). Others have brought into focus the excessive exertion of power in urban spaces through repression, including police and military crackdowns on social movements (Apostolopoulou and Liodaki, 2025; Eraydin and Tasan-Kok, 2014), digital surveillance (Dürr, 2023), and tacit state support for vigilante violence against marginalised communities (Islam, 2024). The permeation of these norm disrupting developments across cases and contexts has

prompted scholars to interrogate the persistent over-reliance on the neoliberal explanatory frame (Parnell and Robinson, 2012), caution against ‘the illusion of neoliberalism as the blueprint for understanding urban development’ (Olt et al., 2024: 2), and interrogate the articulation of these developments as national variegations of neoliberal urbanism (Zhou et al., 2019) or a Southern exception to neoliberal patterns (Koch, 2022). More recently, ‘authoritarian neoliberal urbanism’ has been coined as a term to implicate how one or more of these on the ground developments have moved from the periphery to the centre stage (e.g. Apostolopoulou, 2021; Can and Fanton Ribeiro da Silva, 2024; Ergenc and Yuksekkaya, 2024).

This special issue follows the lines of this growing scholarship and aims to develop understandings of ‘authoritarian neoliberal urbanism’ both as a marker and a concept. As a marker, we suggest, it signposts the ascendance of a new constellation that not only resists being easily dismissed but also demands systematic exploration to explicate what remains unnarrated, unexplored and/or misdiagnosed. As a concept it captures the novel ways in which authoritarianism has become an ever-growing force in our cities in the neoliberal present, not only filtering our experience of urban space but also adapting it to strengthen authoritarian leaders’ claims to legitimacy and consolidate their political power. Though rarely engaged with conceptually, ‘authoritarian neoliberal urbanism’ is implied or used with reference to five conceptual propositions in existing scholarship.

Firstly, a defining characteristic of authoritarian neoliberal urbanism is the *recentralisation of state power* – an impulse observable not only in settings most frequently associated with autocracy but also within formal democracies (Ergenc and Yuksekkaya, 2024; Fearn and Davoudi, 2022; Saad-Filho and Boffo, 2021). In the

UK, for instance, Hambleton (forthcoming) describes the Conservative government's post-2010 financial cuts to local authorities as a form of 'devolution deception' rhetorically promoting decentralisation while entrenching central authority. Indeed, one follows from the other – local, regional or city government is stripped of resources, making lower levels of government more reliant on the centre or the private sector (Peck, 2012). Similarly, in Hungary, Poland, and Turkey the recentralisation of power has been more overt. Aksztejn et al. (2024) document how Poland's and Hungary's central governments restricted local authorities' discretion over local tasks in policy areas such as education, sewage and water management, culture or spatial planning. In Turkey, from 2011 onwards, the central government progressively curtailed municipal autonomy through institutional interventions and the establishment of centralised state agencies consolidated its power at different scales (Savaskan, 2021). In several contexts, emergency decrees are extensively used to bypass electoral bodies to facilitate market-driven policies (Olt et al., 2024), while new laws reinforce centralised control over capital accumulation to commodify lands and resources (Aksztejn et al., 2024). Rather than addressing inefficiencies, recentralisation often serves to strip local authorities of resources and render them dependent on central authorities (Özatağan and Eraydin, 2024b). Power may be decentralised if/when local actors have been disciplined into compliance (Savaskan, 2021).

The second key dynamic is the *stigmatisation and marginalisation of alternative political projects and actors*. The systematic suppression of social movements and local opposition is critical in the unfolding of authoritarian neoliberal urbanism. Bruff (2013) argues that state-directed coercion is essential to maintaining neoliberal order. This tactic is evident across multiple

contexts, where demonstrators are criminalised amidst police and military crackdowns on dissent (Apostolopoulou and Liodaki, 2025; Eraydin and Tasan-Kok, 2014). Across various contexts, activists, ethnic and religious minorities and queer communities have faced intensified prosecution (Adaman and Akbulut, 2021) and state-endorsed violence (Islam, 2024; Sud, 2022). The exercise of state-directed coercion extends beyond direct violence to include digital surveillance (Dürr, 2023) and new legal mechanisms (Apostolopoulou and Liodaki, 2025).

The third hallmark of authoritarian neoliberal urbanism is the *building of extensive patronage networks and clientelist relations*. Urban development is harnessed to privileged, politically connected firms, with public tenders and contracts disproportionately awarded to government-aligned businesses (Gürakar, 2016). Within authoritarian regimes, cronyism and patronage networks serve as key mechanisms for capturing and redistributing rents among firms, political actors, and specific social groups (Borsuk et al., 2022; Kinossian and Morgan, 2023; Tarazona Vento, 2017). Public-private partnerships, large infrastructure projects, and real-estate driven growth serve as mechanisms to create and sustain coalitions between the state, finance, real estate and construction sectors (Can and Fanton Ribeiro da Silva, 2024; Gibson et al., 2023; Szanyi, 2022). These networks distribute urban rents to select social groups, reinforcing loyalty among business elites (Arslantas and Arslantas, 2023; Koch and Valiyev, 2015; Trubina, 2015) and urban poor populations alike (Bayirbag et al., 2023; Li and Liu, 2018; Mascaro, 2024). Moreover, political alignment ensures privileged access to state resources, while opposition areas are often punished through disinvestment (Kuyucu, 2018; Özatağan and Eraydin, 2024b).

To maintain legitimacy, authoritarian neoliberal regimes mobilise *narratives of*

economic progress and prosperity. Megaprojects, coupled with direct financial incentives and social assistance programmes, foster the perception of improved welfare and economic upliftment. In various contexts, neoliberal policies and the use of extensive state power are justified through discourses that emphasise development, prosperity, stability and order (Apostolopoulou, 2021; Bayirbag et al., 2023; Dürr, 2023; Jenss, 2019; Koch and Valiyev, 2015). Such construction-driven growth strategies not only offer material rewards by way of creating jobs and residences but also bolster electoral performance (Marshall et al., 2016; Paker, 2017). It is ultimately through the appeal of ‘fantasy projects’, city building projects, housing provision, infrastructural developments, the burgeoning real estate market and the construction sector that authoritarian leaders and their regimes secure their hold on to power.

Finally, authoritarian neoliberal urbanism *thrives on and intensifies fragmentation, exclusion and the mobilisation of discontent against ‘internal enemies’* – be they marginalised groups or political dissidents. Often neoliberal agendas are aligned with conservative moral frameworks, intensifying divisions along racial, religious, and gender lines. In several countries, neoliberal urban redevelopment projects are fused with cultural projects targeting women, minority communities, and LGBTQIAPN+ groups (Borén et al., 2021; Putzel, 2020; Saad-Filho and Boffo, 2021; Tas, 2022). Such strategic selectivity privileges projects and constituencies aligned with authoritarian–nationalist ideologies (Benczes and Orzechowska-Waclawska, 2024; Doucette and Park, 2018; Li and Liu, 2018; Livert et al., 2024). It simultaneously deepens socio-spatial divisions through exclusionary policies – ranging from separate entrances for low-income residents in luxury developments (Geiselhart

et al., 2020) to revanchist and segregationist urban regeneration (Apostolopoulou and Liodaki, 2025; Can et al., 2024; Yao et al., 2021) to displacement and dispossession (Genç, 2021; Lawreniuk, 2021; Lovering and Turkmen, 2011). In several contexts, planning reforms weaponise class conflicts – younger, precarious professionals versus older, wealthier homeowners; conservative rural versus progressive cosmopolitan – at times alienating electoral blocs and fuelling a legitimacy crisis for governments (Öz and Eder, 2018; Fearn, 2025b).

Special issue contributions

This special issue presents six papers that engage with and advance these propositions through their conceptual interventions and empirically grounded research. Empirically, the papers present case studies from countries where there are some formal features of liberal democracy albeit to varying extents: Brazil (Fontes, 2025), India (Bathla, 2025), Kazakhstan (Borushkina, 2025), Turkey (Kurt Özman and Tasan-Kok, 2025), and the UK (Fearn, 2025a). This diversity reflects our position against the binary opposition between authoritarianism and democracy split on South/North and East/West orientalist lines (Koch, 2022) as well as providing opportunities to shed light on variegated manifestations of authoritarian neoliberal urbanism.

Theoretically, the papers demonstrate adaptability in suiting their conceptual approaches to the empirical context they study, incorporating perspectives from Bourdieu (Fontes, 2025) and Gramsci (Fearn, 2025a) to open up the fragile hegemony of authoritarian neoliberal urbanism and the fractious block of class interests; engaging with Jessop’s (2007) strategic relational approach to shed light on how – beyond the city – processes of authoritarian state-making are inherently linked to infrastructure-led extended urbanisation (Bathla, 2025). Borushkina (2025) brings familiar scholarship

on policy mobilities into conversation with the concept of ‘authoritarian learning’ (Hall, 2023) to draw attention to authoritarian neoliberal urbanism’s cross-border spillover through policy transfer. Kurt Özman and Tasan-Kok (2025) work with political science perspectives of community politics to explicate how illiberal forms of governance manifest through less obvious, informal mechanisms in authoritarian state’s attempts to manage growing discontent. Hendrikse’s (2018) conceptualisation of neo-illiberalism finds ground in Luger and Dürr’s (2025) conceptual intervention. They describe the contemporary urban condition as shaped by illiberal logics and offer an inquiry into the density, crises, speed and virality of the planetary circulation of urban illiberalism, alongside the possibilities for its contestation.

Wrestling with authoritarian neoliberal urbanism(s): New insights and research directions

Taken together, the papers not only illuminate the defining features of authoritarian neoliberal urbanism previously outlined but also offer insights into its diverse manifestations and complexities. The following section brings together these contributions around four overarching themes, each of which, we contend, holds the potential to advance research on authoritarian neoliberal urbanism in new directions.

First, we highlight the ambiguous and often contradictory logics and practices that characterise authoritarian neoliberal urbanism. Second, we elucidate the complex spectrum of responses to the exclusions, disposessions, and forms of violence wrought by authoritarian neoliberal urbanism. Thirdly, we interrogate the temporalities and spatial variegations of authoritarian neoliberalism. These thematic explorations culminate in a reflection on the methodological

implications of researching authoritarian neoliberal urbanism and the challenges it poses for critical urban research.

Unpacking the ambiguous practices of authoritarian neoliberal urbanism

Between rigidity and flexibility. Authoritarian neoliberal urbanism exhibits both a *rigidity* and *flexibility* in its political and institutional forms in response to popular contestations of neoliberalism. On the one hand, we can see the use of ‘stringent regulatory frameworks’ (Kurt Özman and Tasan-Kok, 2025) which support large-scale developers backed up by centralisation of urban planning, censorship, and suppression of dissent. Fearn’s, 2025a study of UK planning reforms shows that austerity significantly weakened state institutions and led to the deepening of urban crises (e.g. in housing). The response is to propose the rolling back of deliberative aspects of urban planning whilst maintaining a rigid focus on the speculative, private sector real estate model – a programme which the government has since adapted (Fearn, 2025a). There is thus a sort of pseudo-revolutionary presentation of sweeping away the supposedly burdensome neoliberal state, demonstrating a radical flexibility in terms of existing policies, but the proposed changes are ones which rigidly maintain a neoliberal orthodoxy towards private development and de-regulation.

Borushkina’s (2025) study of Kazakhstan highlights that there is flexibility within urban policy, but within the limits of tokenistic alterations that do not entail substantive systemic change threatening to existing power structures – in that case crucially following a process of ‘authoritarian learning’ from a similarly inflexible system in Russia. Hence, what determines how flexible a regime needs to be is the persistent desire to maintain existing power structures and legitimacy. While legality and process may

be increasingly flexible for real estate capital and those aiding its goals, rigidity remains – through the force of law and policing – for those who challenge these projects.

Between formality and informality. Flexibility often intersects with *informality*. This is manifest in the granting of amnesties for unauthorised constructions in Istanbul (Kurt Özman and Tasan-Kok, 2025) or even vigilante demolitions that align with state objectives (Bathla, 2025). Several contributions, including Luger and Dürr (2025), show how the turn towards illiberal expediency is associated with speculative fantasy projects and their delivery at speed without necessarily considering compliance with planning codes and regulations. Other manifestations of informality can be seen in the everyday, such as the emergence of profit seeking informal brokers/middlemen who navigate gaps in rigid regulatory frameworks and mediate between the interests of property owners and developers (Kurt Özman and Tasan-Kok, 2025).

Such informalities supplant transparent, rule-bound procedures and serve as strategic tools to navigate and manage the inherent contradictions and tensions that arise from authoritarian neoliberal urban transformations. This dynamic illustrates a kind of back-and-forth power delegation between central governments and local intermediaries in the delivery of state-orchestrated large-scale development projects. It enables on-the-ground flexibility, allowing the state to navigate grievances and leverage new strategies to drive forward state-led and -enabled projects.

A distinctively wider space for entrepreneurial behaviour. Authoritarian neoliberal urbanism operates in a distinctively wider space for entrepreneurial behaviour: not confined to traditional elites or capitalists but extends towards a broader set of actors. In India,

the infrastructure-led growth model catalyses real estate and rental markets, generating a rentier class from intermediate caste groups. These groups, as Bathla (2025) demonstrates, are transformed into ‘investor-citizens’, actively participating in land accumulation and infrastructure development. Kurt Özman and Tasan-Kok (2025) show how central state control creates confusion and opportunity: it empowers the network of developers involved in state-led and -enabled redevelopment projects whilst creating new and confusing situations for citizens – who must navigate the turbulent world of land value appreciation in a context where both the rules and lines of accountability are increasingly and deliberately vague. It is against the backdrop of these ambiguities that the profit-seeking behaviour of developers expands to communities – turning them into ‘entrepreneurial-citizens’ – a point that aligns with Fontes’ observations in Brazil. As Borushkina (2025) shows, in the case of Kazakhstan, even activist circles – motivated not only by financial gain but also reputational capital – can act as policy entrepreneurs. In doing so, they contribute to authoritarian policy formation and help build stakeholder coalitions that attract state-level support.

However, the space for entrepreneurial entities is constrained by the power of the state as a policymaker, a regulator and an entrepreneurial actor that operates through land-rent extraction and speculation. Indeed, several contributions identify the state’s (near) monopolistic control over the land and real estate market. This power is variously used to manage, oversee and arbitrate competing entrepreneurial interests, as well as actively undermining, suppressing or sidelining certain market players and market-driven initiatives. This state behaviour articulates against and transcends entrepreneurial logics in complex and often contradictory ways. However, it helps

authoritarian leaders build patronage networks and benefit a select group of private interests, build clientelist relations with urbanites and powerful alliances with semi-autonomous non-state actors (Bathla, 2025).

A blend of top-down and bottom-up politics. What each of the contributions emphasise, is a combination of top-down and bottom-up politics. As Luger and Dürr (2025) argue in their conceptual paper, particularly within the demands of urbanisation, illiberal practices are becoming the default option to expand urban space – whether that is ever upwards in the supertall structures of Manhattan or Dubai, or outwards to the urban (and outer space!) peripheries – which the paper from Bathla (2025) further attests to.

On the other hand, however, the role of bottom-up politics in (re)constituting authoritarian neoliberal urbanism is undeniable. Focusing on the UK, Fearn's, 2025a contribution shows how the popular desire for homeownership and affordable housing across generations posed a new dilemma for the state when reforming planning policy, with more authoritarian measures proposed to reproduce neoliberal hegemony. The fragile hegemony of authoritarian neoliberal urbanism is further taken up by Fontes (2025), who notes that progressive coalitions resist authoritarian populism using *social capital*, including networks and cultural ties, while conservative coalitions support state violence and traditional values through *moral capital*, often rooted in religion.

Bottom-up politics acts as a counterbalance to the conflicts and tensions that characterise exclusionary, divisive and penal national politics both materially and discursively. It helps authoritarian states demonstrate their generosity by distributing concessions and privileges to permeate their authoritative power into neighbourhoods (Kurt Özman and Tasan-Kok, 2025),

disseminate discourses that propagate certain lifestyles and community morales (Fontes, 2025), disincentivise dissent and mobilise others in the city against resisting publics in service of the development projects (Bathla, 2025).

This manifest centrality of bottom-up politics suggests that authoritarian neoliberal urbanism takes shape not through momentous and radical change but simultaneously in a submerged and gradual manner.

Resisting authoritarian neoliberal urbanism

One of the most compelling insights to emerge is the ambiguous nature of resistance under authoritarian neoliberal urbanism. Several contributions note oppositional positions that push back de-regulatory, centralising reforms and the extension of coercive state power. While mass opposition is often seen as creating openings for progressive coalitions and alternatives, such hopeful momentum can also be redirected in violent or deeply reactionary ways. Bathla (2025) shows how the beneficiary caste groups are empowered by the central government to carry out vigilante attacks and demolitions on the Muslim and also Christian minorities – violently removing them from their land on the basis of a Hindutva nationalism which delegitimises their presence there (or anywhere else in India). Such overt acts of violence are often combined with intensifying pressures on dissenters, the arrest of prominent activists and the suppression of opportunities for collective organisation (Jenss and Schuetze, 2021; Lawreniuk, 2021). These measures readily used to quell intensifying opposition are part of the 'spectrum of disciplinary practices' (Tansel, 2017: 6) that weakens and fragments collective interests (Özdemir and Eraydin, 2017), causes acts of resistance to 'lose fervour' (Kuyucu and Ünsal, 2010: 1492) and threatens the transformative power of

counterhegemonic alliances and movements (Sørbøe, 2023).

When traditional spaces for dissent and adversarial struggle are eroded, communities often turn to informal coalitions and bottom-up organising. These responses foster alternative forms of solidarity and shared resource-making, as seen in the Fikirtepe case in Istanbul, where community actors cultivate public spaces, knowledge, and goals outside official planning channels (Kurt Özman and Tasan-Kok, 2025). However, resistance is not free from contradiction. In many instances, communities adopt entrepreneurial or ‘developer-like’ strategies to secure resources and visibility, mirroring the logic they seek to resist (Fontes, 2025; Kurt Özman and Tasan-Kok, 2025). This dual positioning both enables agency and risks reinforcing the dominant regime, complicating any easy division between opposition and complicity.

The successes of opposition and resistance, however, are often context-dependent and prone to reversal. Fearn, 2025a shows how the proposals for a radical overhaul of urban planning are a third attempt from the Conservative party to fully institute a more cohesively neoliberal set of policies against resistance from the party’s own voting base – which at the time failed (for the same reasons) only to be taken up by the Labour government in a new guise – reflecting the centralised nature of UK politics and its narrow ideological networks. Elsewhere, out-right resistance has been shown to result in authoritarian consolidation and intensification (Altinörs and Akçay, 2022; Lawreniuk, 2020), although questions remain as to the novel ways in which resistance is overturned.

Such paradoxes raise crucial questions: What constitutes meaningful resistance in an era where neoliberal and authoritarian rationalities are so deeply interwoven? When oppositional practices are overturned, absorbed into or mimic the structures of

authoritarian governance, how can we assess their transformative potential? These tensions suggest that resistance must be analysed not only in terms of intent or form but also in the broader systems it interacts with and potentially sustains.

Authoritarian neoliberal urbanisms: Legacies, mutations, trajectories

Authoritarian neoliberal urbanism, hence, does not manifest uniformly over time and space. There are more dramatic and violent instantiations and *intensifying trajectories* (Bathla, 2025; Borushkina, 2025; Fontes, 2025) as well as smoother trajectories that manifest as the continuity and consolidation of settled hierarchies (Fearn, 2025a). Thus, whilst authoritarian neoliberal urbanism develops through some similar structural conditions, deriving from the failures of neoliberalism and its liberal institutions (Luger and Dürr, 2025), we also see it as the role of researchers to show how different contexts develop in varied ways with novel and context-specific variegations.

The *temporalities* of authoritarian (re)turns make this variegation apparent. Kurt Özman and Tasan-Kok (2025) remind us that Turkey’s authoritarian entrepreneurial statecraft builds upon the 1980s’ neoliberal reforms, which carried authoritarian features, perhaps most clearly manifest in the market-driven transformation of informally developed housing areas through governmental amnesties. Borushkina (2025) shows that trajectories of authoritarian neoliberal urbanism are not necessarily determined by crises but may also be initiated and/or catalysed through active learning and policy mobility between different nations. This is where *cultural legacies and traditions* of state socialism helped authoritarian logics to travel from Russia and blend with the existing system in Kazakhstan.

Researching authoritarian neoliberal urbanisms: Adaptive methodologies

Understanding these variegations and temporalities raises the question of appropriate methodological approaches. Contributing authors demonstrate both adaptability and diversity in suiting their methodological approaches to the empirical context they study. In the UK, document analysis of official publications is used to examine their contestation and failure to become legislation (Fearn, 2025a). Such discursive methodologies foreground the value of discourse as practice, recognising that many authoritarian decisions are verbal or delegated (Hall, 2023). This enables fleshing out the prolonged and ongoing as well as shifting discursive practices involved in the (re)configuration of state-driven, capitalist forms of urban development.

In other contexts, authors recognise that official narratives and legal frameworks may not reflect implementation and outcome. This necessitates integrating diverse sources of data to create new knowledge. In Kazakhstan (Borushkina, 2025), having to deal with incomplete or skewed data and the gap between *de jure* (law) and *de facto* (actual practice) realities necessitated a conscious focus on looking beyond legal acts and official documents, and explicitly drawing on process tracing, looking for similarity of wordings, coincidental timing across press releases, forum speeches and interviews.

Other contributions take a more ethnographic and qualitative approach to draw out less visible and not always legitimate practices. Kurt Özman and Tasan-Kok (2025), Bathla (2025) and Fontes (2025) base their contributions on extensive ethnographic studies which combine interviews and observations of specific localities, directly communicating with a range of urban actors – community members, activists, and those occupying official positions.

These approaches help emphasise the bottom up and intermediary roles played within authoritarian neoliberal urbanism.

What is most important to emphasise is how increasingly authoritarian states place challenges and limitations on research particularly in terms of collecting the most celebrated forms of primary data. Issues of safety and physical inaccessibility imposed by conflict can necessitate using online interviews and institutional/central government representatives are increasingly resistant to participating in research. These challenges necessitate the integration of diverse sources of data – regulatory frameworks, press releases, media publications, speeches as well as legal proceedings of court cases – while also acknowledging the need for in-depth engagement with non-state actors in the study of authoritarian neoliberal urbanism.

Moreover, universities, academics and research participants are the objects of authoritarian repression. One paper in the issue has an anonymous co-author due to the dangers they may face; another pulled out during the production of the issue due to intensifying threats to journalists and academics based abroad as well as domestically. Similar concerns were expressed by another author, which ultimately led to the difficult decision not to contribute to the special issue. The US government is reviving McCarthy era laws to summarily cancel the visas of foreign students and academics without any due process (even those with permanent resident status) for speaking out against the genocide in Palestine, as well as directly targeting universities to coerce them into cancelling funding and curriculums which address issues of inequality and injustice. The very analysis of authoritarian practices – urban or otherwise – is therefore under threat. Hence, it is imperative that researchers, universities and publishing platforms adapt to how they may continue to

pursue free inquiry and most importantly – truth – in this context.

Concluding remarks

This Special Issue has brought into focus the multifaceted dynamics of authoritarian neo-liberal urbanism, advancing current debates by critically examining the connections between political illiberalism, market logics, and state violence. The complexities underwriting these connections urge scholars to move beyond reductive framings and to take seriously the variegated, contested, and evolving nature of authoritarian neoliberal urbanism. The issue was written during the ongoing destruction of Gaza City and ethnic cleansing of its population, with the US president proposing an AI-rendered vision of a ‘riviera of the Middle East’ in its place, demonstrating an extremity in both violence and relentless focus on accumulation by dispossession for real estate development. The commitment to such violence, though, has laid bare the brutality of (neo)liberal states, meaning that authoritarian neoliberal urbanism has something like ‘dominance without hegemony’ (Guha, 1997). The contradictions and ambiguities brought into light in this special issue create a space for imagining new possibilities for urban life beyond the authoritarian-neoliberal nexus. It is within these contradictions and ambiguities that we may find alternatives to neoliberal continuity and to the slide towards a more illiberal form of capitalism.

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